

Remarks of Governor Haley Barbour  
Healthy Mississippi Summit  
June 15, 2006

Welcome, all of you. I want to thank Dr. Hill, Dr. Katz, all of the participants and presenters, and our sponsors, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the National Governors Association who have so generously contributed to this event.

We gather here today against a backdrop of reports that show, sadly, Mississippians aren't getting healthier. Obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and other health problems are at crisis proportions.

We instinctively know the importance of promoting better health care – lower costs, more job creation, and a longer and better quality of life for all Mississippians, including minority populations that are more at risk for diabetes, cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure.

But we need to turn instinct into action.

When I was elected Governor, there was a health care crisis in Mississippi caused by lawsuit abuse. Frivolous lawsuits increased the cost of health care and caused doctors to leave the state and hospitals to lose insurance. Obstetric wards were closing and neurosurgeons had stopped performing emergency surgery.

After passing what the Wall Street Journal called the most comprehensive tort reform legislation in the country to end lawsuit abuse, the largest insurer of doctors in the state cut their rates for the first time in years and began writing new policies, the biggest health care insurer in the state cut its rates, and new insurance providers entered Mississippi. We are now keeping our doctors in Mississippi, and that was an essential step toward a healthier Mississippi.

Now we must turn our focus to another health care crisis – the burden of chronic diseases.

I had planned to do this summit last year, but a bad girl named Katrina – the worst natural disaster in American history – changed my plan. I can report to you now, almost 10 months later, we have made and continue to make real progress in restoring quality health care to south Mississippi, particularly on the Coast where the damage was so devastating.

Today, our focus is more specifically on the challenges and opportunities to promote more and better ways to have healthier kids in our schools, healthier adults and seniors in our communities, and healthier employees in our workplaces. The range of issues is wide.

I support a revised curriculum that requires more physical activity for students in schools and healthier sources for food and drink. I support the recently-announced move by State Superintendent Hank Bounds and the Board of Education to allow only healthy products in school vending machines. Let students reach for fruit juice or milk instead of a sugar-laden soft drink. We also must work to be sure school cafeterias serve healthier meals and prepare them appropriately.

Every school needs a workable wellness plan, which is a requirement of the No Child Left Behind law. We need low-cost programs to help teachers and kids eat right, exercise, stay away from tobacco and drugs. Our children will become more energetic and interested in learning about healthier choices.

Studies show minority citizens have a disproportionate share of chronic diseases. We must partner with community leaders who can make a difference, such as faith-based populations. Indeed, I believe churches, long the center of many African-American communities, can be the health centers, too...sites for testing for diabetes and high-blood pressure, organizers of exercise and wellness programs for members, even for classes on diet and healthier ways to cook.

We will also hear more about how local elected officials – mayors and supervisors – can improve the health of their constituents by including such things as walking trails and bike paths in their infrastructure and zoning decisions. There are many steps toward a healthier Mississippi.

We know unhealthy lifestyles contribute to higher health insurance costs and hurt productivity. Today we will hear how some employers and insurers are taking a proactive approach to improving that situation.

We're taking steps at the state-level, too; for example, we've created a "wellness benefit" in our state employee insurance plan for the 190,000 Mississippians who depend upon it. We must do more to improve the health of our state employees and we will learn more about those as we move toward a healthier Mississippi.

Two of our speakers today, David Katz and Ed Hill, will discuss the broad scope of the burden of chronic disease in Mississippi and America. I'm certain that one of the issues they will discuss will be tobacco use.

With all of the years of press coverage, court action and political maneuvering over tobacco, let me state this as clearly as I can: One of the most important things we can do to reduce heart disease, cancer and other chronic diseases in Mississippi is to get people to stop smoking, like I did; or better yet, never start. Our Healthy Mississippi program will increase efforts to reduce smoking, especially among vulnerable teens who see smoking as some rite of passage instead of a road to addiction and dependency.

We're taking other concrete steps to discourage tobacco use.

This year, I signed into law banning smoking in public buildings. This is another small, but important step toward a healthier Mississippi.

I have proposed a comprehensive and constitutional “Healthy Kids” initiative that fights youth smoking and drug use by putting the \$20 million per year that has been illegally diverted to the Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi to new and better purposes. I will include the Healthy Kids program in my budget this fall.

This anti-smoking plan would almost double the number of school nurses – a very important program that must be continued and expanded to fight drug use by students.

This plan would maintain anti-tobacco advertising efforts targeted at youth audiences.

This plan would provide \$5 million for cancer research and treatment at the University Medical Center, putting more money to help patients with smoking-related illnesses.

And, my plan would include \$5 million to fight illegal drug use by our kids. It would increase drug enforcement agents on the streets.

All of these are steps toward a healthier Mississippi.

I was talking about this summit with a reporter the other day and she sort of timidly said ... do you mind if I ask you a personal question? I said go ahead. She said one governor who launched a health initiative in his state lost a hundred pounds and became an avid runner. She asked if I was planning to do the same.

My first thought was ... Now that’s a personal question. But then I realized the state of a person’s health is about as personal as it gets. The fact is this whole effort, the reason for us being here today, is to begin to convince people to change our own personal behavior ... to change our lifestyle ... to think, eat, act, and live healthier. Diet, exercise, avoid tobacco and drugs, be moderate in behavior.

So I didn’t mind the question and the answer. First, I won’t lose 100 pounds and I shouldn’t. But I’m going to practice what I preach. Which means exercise more and more regularly; not only eat less but drink less; and stay away from sweets which I love. With that healthy lifestyle, Mississippians will have a healthier governor, and a thinner one. One hundred pounds, no, but there will be a lot less of me. Will I get back to my playing weight on the 1964 Yazoo High football team? Don’t hold your breath.

But I will make the necessary personal choices that result in a healthier lifestyle. And I will encourage Mississippians ... every family, every community, every business, every school, every person ... to make these choices, too. To exercise appropriately,

eat properly and not to use tobacco or illegal drugs. That is to live healthy. You'll live longer and better.

Thank you, and I look forward to today's discussion.